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20 YEARS OF THE RTI ACT

India's landmark law that put power of information in the hands of the common man is facing challenges, but citizens continue to fight for transparency and accountability

Anuja

Ashok Kumar is an unhurried man. His checked white shirt and denim pants are in stark contrast with the bright coloured animal figurines on the walls of the Basti Vikas Kendra (community welfare centre), which doubles up as a child care facility, in South Delhi's Begumpur locality.

It is a hot afternoon and the centre is slowly beginning to fill with people, mostly women, who have come for the weekly meeting. Today's topic of discussion is the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

"*Jahan samasya hain, wahan shikayat hain aur jahan shikayat hain, wahan soochna ka adhikar hain* [Where there is a problem, there is a complaint, and where there is a complaint, there is RTI]," says Kumar to the gathering before handing out a pamphlet on how to file an RTI application. This is followed by a 'trivia quiz' on the law itself.

Kumar is a community manager with the citizens group Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), which works primarily in the slums of Delhi to create awareness about the RTI Act and enable public participation in governance. "For the poor, RTI has become a weapon to fight corruption and red-tape at community levels," says the 43-year-old, joining his colleague Suman Devi in taking up RTI applications from the women at the meeting.

Today, October 12, marks 20 years since the RTI Act, 2005, came into force. The Act empowers citizens to seek information from public authorities and make governments more transparent and accountable.

The list of its success stories is long – from unearthing high-profile corruption (for example, the Adarsh housing scam in 2010) to exposing gaps in implementation of the rural jobs programme and seeking transparency in the electoral bonds scheme. The Act has also been useful to obtain information related to civic issues, including pollution levels, environmental violations, and road safety, among others.

But equally significant is the story of the Act's fight for survival. Users say that frequent denial of information, pendency in appeals, and vacant posts at Information Commissions have affected the law's implementation. Legislative amendments granting the Centre control over the functioning of Information Commissioners and the proposed changes that allow withholding of 'personal information' even in cases of public interest, could further curb the RTI's goal of promoting transparency.

Best transparency law

The narrow and congested alley of Delhi's Savitri Nagar locality makes it difficult to spot the office of Anjali Bhardwaj, co-convenor of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) and founding member of SNS. Tucked on the first floor of a building, the two-room space is filled with posters of NCPRI's old meetings that played a key role in drafting the legislation.

Often regarded as one of the best transparency laws in the world, the RTI Act, 2005, was passed after years of public campaigning. And it has since been used by lakhs of people to expose gaps in government functioning. "It is one of the most empowering legislations and has helped people engage in a very meaningful way with governance," says Bhardwaj, dressed in her trademark cotton sari, as she settles in a chair across a round wooden table.

Nearly 60 lakh RTI applications are filed each year – globally, among the highest numbers under transparency laws, according to Bhardwaj. "Studies have shown that in nearly 50% cases, people get the information sought when they file an RTI plea," she says. "It has really helped in asking for information on basic rights like ration, pension, water and sanitation."

New Delhi-based advocate Tanmay Singh had his first brush with the RTI Act when he interned as a law student at the Madhya Pradesh State Information Commission in Bhopal. "When people interact with the government in daily life, they do not realise the extent to which they could possibly get information about their concerns. From that point of view, RTI literacy is very important," says the 35-year-old, who was earlier associated with the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a digital rights advocacy organisation. Singh is an active RTI user, and while at IFF, he helped track data on Internet shutdowns across different States by filing RTI applications.

Over time, there has been a "clear realisation" of the power of the RTI Act, says Bhardwaj, and therefore, there is also pushback in the form of legislative changes to the Act and information denials. Not just that, there are reports of more than 300 instances of harassment and attacks on citizens linked to information sought under the RTI Act. Data from a tracker run by the non-profit Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) says that 108 RTI users have been killed so far.

"This highlights a dire need for the protection of whistleblowers. The WhistleBlowers Protection Act was passed in 2014 but the law has not been implemented and this has been a significant challenge," says Bhardwaj, calling the delay a 'policy failure'.

Justice vs. blackmail

Transparency campaigner Lokesh Batra, who relentlessly secured information on the now-scrapped electoral bonds scheme, says "what you do with the information" matters more than just getting it. "This is where the media and NGOs such as the Association for Democratic Reforms [ADR] that went to court [against the bonds scheme] play a key role. I am just a one-man soldier," he says.

Batra, 78, has been using the RTI Act since it came into force and some of his initial applications were on the infamous Nithari killings of 2005. "Sometimes you succeed [in getting information] and sometimes you don't, but you never let go. Even now, I file appeals with the Central Information Commission [CIC], the nodal body, fully knowing that I may not live to see them through," says the retired Commodore.

The information Batra obtained on the electoral bonds scheme was critical to ADR's plea in the Supreme Court, eventually leading to striking down of the funding mode termed "unconstitutional" by the top court.

Another legal plea by RTI veteran Subhash Chandra Agrawal successfully brought the office of the Chief Justice of India under the law's ambit. Agrawal, who holds a Guinness World Record for most letters to the editor published in newspapers, was a prolific user of the Act, especially in the first decade of the law's implementation. In those early years, one could often find him at the CIC in New Delhi for his appeal hearings. His work has helped spotlight information on public spending, government functioning, and judicial appointments.

"The RTI Act has done wonders and there is no doubt about it," says 75-year-old Agarwal, who now works as an RTI consultant to ministries and other public authorities. He continues to file RTI pleas, albeit less frequently, on issues of public good. But he has also observed the "misuse of RTI by applicants" and calls it one of the biggest challenges faced by the Act. He has come across several pleas, he says, filed with an intention to blackmail or for self-publicity.

Venkatesh Nayak, director of CHRI, says that "the odd case of the individual filing hundreds or even thousands of RTI applications in a short span of time" is used to label all RTI users. "Citizens and journalists seeking accountability for corruption in the government are often dubbed 'blackmailers'," he adds.

Behind the scenes

As of June 30 this year, more than 4 lakh appeals and complaints filed before 29 Information Commissions (both CIC and State Information Commissions) are pending, according to an assessment by SNS. Six information commissions have been non-functional for varying lengths of time in the last 14 months and two commissions are completely defunct as of October 7.

Three commissions, including the CIC, are functioning without a head, and all posts of information commissioners are vacant in two state commissions, as of October 7, 2025.

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How to file an RTI application

- A request for information can be typed or handwritten in English/Hindi or regional languages and addressed to the Public Information Officer (PIO) of the department/office concerned
- Send it via post or submit at PIO's office along with a ₹10 application fee payable via UPI, netbanking, postal order. Get an acknowledgement receipt. For online application, visit www.rtionline.gov.in
- Wait for 30 days (48 hours in urgent cases of life and liberty) to get a reply
- If no reply received or dissatisfied with the response, users can file a first appeal addressed to the First Appellate Authority of the same department
- If still dissatisfied, file a second appeal with the Central/State Information Commissions. These commissions are headed by Chief Information Commissioners and its role is to handle appeals from citizens and to ensure that the public has access to information

Highest backlog of appeals and complaints

(as of June 30, 2025)

Maharashtra	**95,340**
Karnataka	**47,825**
Tamil Nadu	**41,059**
Chhattisgarh	**34,147**
Bihar *(as of March 31)*	**29,919**

Source: Satark Nagrik Sangathan

A protest against the July 2019 amendment to the RTI Act in New Delhi. (GETTY IMAGES)

Longing to belong

Sachin Kundalkar's translated novel explores queer anguish and societal repression with an almost meandering narrative structure

A poster of the 2022 film *Cobalt Blue*, adapted from Sachin Kundalkar's (below) first novel. (UMESH VINAYAK KULKARNI)

Meenakshi Shivram

Silk Route reads as a logarithmic sequel to Marathi writer and filmmaker Sachin Kundalkar's first and well-acclaimed novel *Cobalt Blue*. Brother and sister love the same person in both novels. *Silk Route* begins with the same starting point and curves the trajectory. The sister, who is expecting a child outside of marriage, commits suicide. The brother, Nishikant, is pushed off to Mumbai from Pune. The memory of the dead sister and their common lover, Nikhil, torments Nishikant as he moves from one relationship to another looking for comfort and completion in a society that is repressively heteronormative.

This is a book about the quiet despair experienced by the queer community and the even lesser acceptance of their sexual orientation in a seemingly progressive society – not just in Mumbai, Pune or Chennai but even in the U.K. and the U.S. The aches of loneliness and of separation, pining for freedom from the nights of sleepless darkness can be expressed only in poetry or through the suggestive language of silence.

The title 'Silk Route' is open to interpretation. The narrative structure reminds one of the delicate undulating flow of a silk garment. Nishikant, ashamed of his middle-class family, listens to Def Leppard, writes poems, stares at the sky, walks for hours and dreams of his sister's lover, Nikhil. Then he moves to Mumbai where he meets Shiv Malhotra who has come to the same campus from Delhi. We are taken through Shiv's life and that of his ambitious parents. Shiv leaves for California. Nishikant goes to London.

There, he meets Srinivas and we are taken through the latter's life. Srinivas tells us about Jules. Jules leads us to Sophia... the movement is like that of a lazy camera that zooms into one image, explores its every angle and then, figuring out the pointlessness, fades away only to pick out another image and its particulars. That's the silken flow – unhurried, languorous, carrying the aftertaste of a lethargic intoxication. The story, without a centre, is like that silk fabric that slips through your fingers.

Opinionated narrative voice

While it is imperative to give space and voice to the marginalised, this lack of a centre and the slovenly narration may not entice all readers. The narrative voice, not different from those of its main characters, is overwhelmingly opinionated. The world is clearly at fault. There is an irreverence towards everything. Every heterosexual marriage is a sham. Academics are dull; social workers transform happy people into unhappy ones; village women are cunning; capitalists are sharks; socialists did no work; Paris is overrated as her intellectuals preached nonsense to the world.

Then there are the prejudiced universal truths: being an intellectual in India doesn't require being particularly smart or far-sighted or original. Like everyone who studies medicine in India, Nishikant has become lethargic and dumb. The room carries the distinctive scent of naphthalene balls, used by diligent housewives to balance out their lack of worldly intelligence.

The nightmares and fantasies are compelling; but the reference to Blanche and Stella from *A Streetcar Named Desire* is contrived.

Swinging like a pendulum

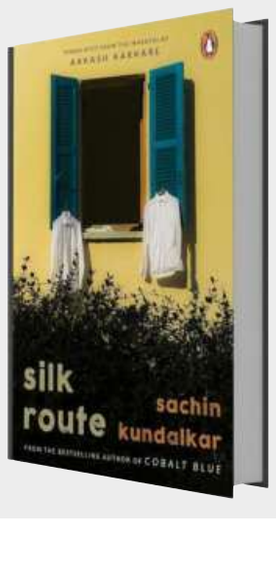
The novel is laced with violence without a context or purpose: Jules' alcoholic father hits his mother with an iron frying pan, killing her instantly. Chimaji is fatally bitten by a snake; Pushkin by a ferocious guard dog. Srinivas spends his spare time killing ants and squirrels; Suhasini feeds poison to stray dogs that howl at odd hours. Jules is shot dead by the police in Mumbai; Shiv is shot dead in the U.S.

Sometimes, it feels as if the novel is demonstrating Schopenhauer's deeply comfortless, but not unfounded, thoughts on existence, on the will to live: 'Life swings like a pendulum backward and forward between pain and boredom.'

Kundalkar has been lucky with his translators. Aakash Karkare is almost as good as Jerry Pinto, who translated *Cobalt Blue*. The cover photo by Anurag Banerjee is intensely dazzling.

This novella ends with the line: "To Be Continued." The blurb to the book says that this is the first part of a series. We have waited for over a decade for Sachin's second novel. We can wait for the sequel as well.

The reviewer is a Sahitya Akademi translation award winner.



Silk Route
Sachin Kundalkar, trs Aakash Karkare
Penguin
₹299

IN CONVERSATION

LIBERATION BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Tamil author, poet and Rajya Sabha MP Salma juggles writing and politics, and foregrounds the voices of women in a new translation of her first novel

Akila Kannadasan
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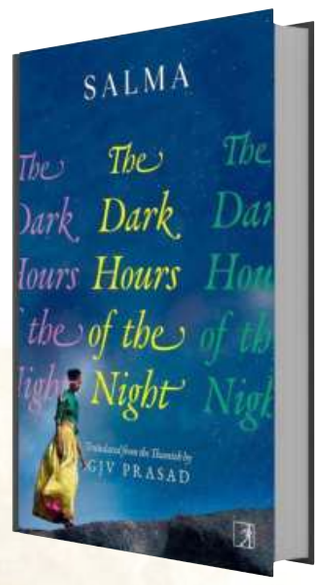
Tamil poet Salma wrote her first novel in stolen moments. When her chores for the day were done; when her children were away in school; when her husband stepped out after his afternoon nap, she would extract her notebook from its hiding place and start writing. Thus was born *Irandaam Jaamangalin Kathai*, written between 2002 and 2004. The novel has now been translated into English by G.J.V. Prasad, and titled *The Dark Hours of the Night* (published by Simon & Schuster).

Much like Salma's writing in those early years, our interview too takes place in snatches. As a Rajya Sabha MP and media spokesperson for Tamil Nadu's ruling party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Salma is often on the move. "I haven't been able to write anything for the past few months," she says over the phone, travelling in a car in New Delhi. Does she miss her quiet writerly life? "After being locked up at home till I was 33, I'm able to see the outside world now. I enjoy travelling and meeting people, for which my political work is apt. I try and write when I have the time."

The Dark Hours of the Night follows the life of Rabia, an adolescent girl living in a conservative small town in Tamil Nadu. Salma weaves multiple threads around the women in Rabia's life – her mother, aunts, neighbours, best friend Mathina – each of them poignant and throbbing with life, love, desire, rebellion, anger. Much like her characters, for a long time Salma too led an isolated life at home with a joint family in Thuvarankurichi near Tiruchi.

Shrouded in secrecy

"I wrote the novel during a difficult phase in my life," she recalls. "My personal pain and that of those around me are reflected in it." By then, Salma had already published a collection of poems, *Oru Maalaiyum Innoru Maalaiyum* (2000). She, and some other women poets, faced threats for one of the poems in the book. Which is why when the novel took shape in her head, she decided to write it in secret. "I didn't even tell my husband," she says. But he caught her red-handed one day and hid the manuscript away.



Salma was heartbroken. "I finally found out that he had kept it locked up in his cupboard," she recalls. After retrieving it, she travelled to Tiruchi and Madurai with three notebooks of the manuscript, looking for ways to safeguard it. "I considered getting it photo-copied, but that would mean waiting for a long time at the copier's, which was not possible given my circumstances," she says. She just had to ensure it reached her publisher safely. "Finally, Kannan Sundaram of Kalachuvadu [her publisher] sent someone to collect it from me," she says, adding that she couldn't be at peace even then. "I was worried he would lose it along the way," she laughs. The manuscript eventually made its way to a printing press in Chennai. "I later found out that they refused to print it citing the nature of some of the content," says Salma.

Author and Rajya Sabha MP Salma (BIJOY GHOSH)

When her novel made it past all the roadblocks and was published, Salma says the initial reception was not encouraging. "The Tamil literary scene was not appreciative of new voices back then," she says. But gradually, the book got noticed, especially after its Malayalam translation came out. Salma started getting invited to literary events. She heard from readers who said they liked her work. An earlier English translation, titled *The Hour Past Midnight*, was longlisted for the Man Asian Prize in 2009 and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2010.

Modern women in rural India

While *The Dark Hours of the Night* is heart-rending in its description of the back-breaking, invisible labour of women at home and the way their individuality, likes and desires are snuffed out by the men in their lives, it also has portions that make one laugh at the no-holds-barred conversation among the characters. The raunchy small talk among a group of women in a tightly-packed room at a funeral, for instance, is hilarious.

Salma says that the story is peppered with the many interesting characters she has interacted with in her village. "These are women who have probably not read a book in their lives, but their mindset is so liberated, and they are very individualistic." Two decades after the book first came out in Tamil, Salma says that the lives of the women she wrote about have not changed much.

"I don't think reading a book will bring about drastic change," she says. "I wrote this story to spark a new beginning, to create a discussion." But young women do come forward to tell her how her political career has inspired them to stand on their own feet. "Some of them go to college in Madurai and Tiruchi, unlike before when they were forced to discontinue their education after a certain age," she notes, adding that change is gradual.

Despite all the travel between Delhi and Chennai, Salma makes it a point to spend a few days every month in her village, meeting people and taking stock of things to be done.

On guard

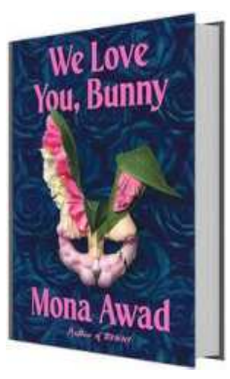
Salma is now working on the second part of the novel that will be based on Rabia and Mathina as adults. "A lot of readers were curious about their lives," she says. It is almost ready, and is likely to come out later this year in Tamil followed by the English translation.

The author and poet confesses that writers, in these days of censorship and banning of published literary works, have to be watchful of what they write. "Since I'm also in politics, people are watching. I have to be careful with what I say," she says, adding that she does tend to hold herself back when writing.

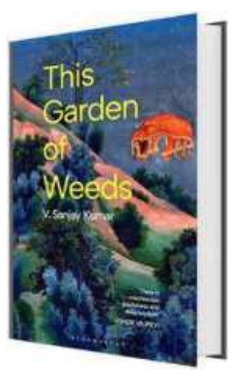
Works like Kannada writer Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, translated by Deepa Bhasthi, winning the International Booker Prize is only proof of one thing, says Salma. "If a voice arises from a place that has not been heard before, it will get noticed."

BROWSER

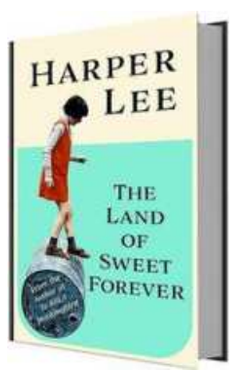
We Love You, Bunny
Mona Awad
Simon & Schuster
₹799
In this sequel to the 2019 bestseller *Bunny*, a darkly satirical take on literary academia, we get to hear the other side of the story. Longlisted for Canada's Giller Prize, Margaret Atwood calls the novel's near-Gothic setting "soooo genius".



This Garden of Weeds
V. Sanjay Kumar
Bloomsbury
₹599
This novel set in Mumbai is his way of 'exploring the shadows of the art world', says the author, a gallerist himself. The insider's perspective brings heft to this story about an ambitious father-daughter duo determined to shake up the exclusive world of contemporary Indian art.



The Land of Sweet Forever
Harper Lee
Hutchinson Heinemann
₹1,299
In 2016, eight of Lee's unpublished short stories, written before *To Kill a Mockingbird*, were found in her apartment after her death. These, along with eight of her published essays, come together in this collection.



A Guardian and a Thief
Megha Majumdar
Hamish Hamilton
₹699
Like her debut novel, *A Burning*, which won the Sahitya Akademi's Yuva Puraskar award, this book too explores themes of inequality and social justice. Set in a near-future Kolkata, the novel paints an eerily prescient picture of climate destruction.

Path to mindfulness

From diagnosis to recovery, two professionals provide a lucid account on ways to negotiate severe mental health conditions

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

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If a bunch of life stories can shape your world view on the huge spectrum that is mental health, they are probably the 11 personal accounts in *Homecoming*. Rising out of the lived experiences of women in urban India from different social and economic strata, who share the commonality of having to negotiate severe mental health conditions, the collection is a lucid account of the struggles that pave the path of diagnosis, social support, recovery, 'normalcy' and 'wholeness'.

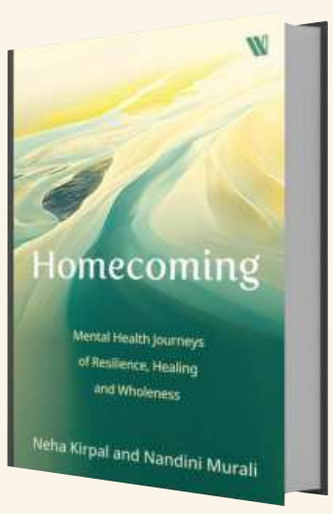
A collaboration between two of the authors, Neha Kirpal and Nandini Murali, the selection of essays supported by the India Mental Health Alliance, is a perfect foil to the widespread notions of mental health, stigmatising, exaggerated, dramatic, discriminatory and, at the least, inaccurate. The message running though the varied experiences that are recounted is that this is a spectrum, with a range of experiences that are independent of one's family, social, cultural, religious backgrounds, though sometimes exacerbated by these very factors that are meant to cocoon and protect. It does help that both the curators are mental health care professionals, but even more than that they have had their own very close encounters with mental health and tragic loss.

Toll of trauma

In her account of growing up with a mother with schizophrenia and surviving the suicide of her younger brother, Kirpal says "trauma takes a toll over time and our bodies keep score as we suppress and move on in the name of resilience." She stressed on the need to periodically take stock. It's interesting and is defining of mental health itself that none of the writers followed a linear path to happiness or from darkness to light. The writers progress from pain, but sometimes lapse back into it, and then and now, there's a glimmer of hope – shadows and light are a chiaroscuro the patterns of which are wholly unpredictable.

And yet these authors have navigated through the darkness, and have not given up. They have found solutions that work for them and offer it to others, in the hope they will benefit too. Some of them find solace in diagnoses, having been entirely in the dark about their condition – a diagnosis gives them the courage to take their lives in their hands and move ahead. Others take strength from empowering languages, family and friends as support systems that hold them up even as they are sinking, but ultimately dipping in to their reserves of strength to achieve success, scars and all. For Murali, it was throwing herself into a project to help others process suicide bereavement.

The language is poetic in some places, and as they navigate the maze that a non-linear narrative sets, there are descriptions of events with articulation of emotions sewn on to imagery most people can appreciate. This line, for instance, in Zainab Patel's chapter: "Life can feel like jumping into a fast train in Mumbai where you are hit from behind and forced to keep moving forward without a chance to process what is happening." Life, indeed, often can be overwhelming, but the 11 women of this book do convey the message that emerging out of the darkest of times is possible.



Homecoming: Mental Health Journeys of Resilience, Healing and Wholeness
Neha Kirpal, Nandini Murali
Westland Books
₹499

Aatish Taseer's travel writings seek answers for both historical puzzles and questions about his 'exile'

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

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In the 1940s, while he was in Nazi-occupied France, Pablo Picasso was once visited in his studio by a German officer. Seeing a photograph of Picasso standing before *Guernica*, his 1937 painting of the Nazi bombing of the eponymous town in Basque country in northern Spain during the Spanish civil war, the officer asked him: "Did you do that?"

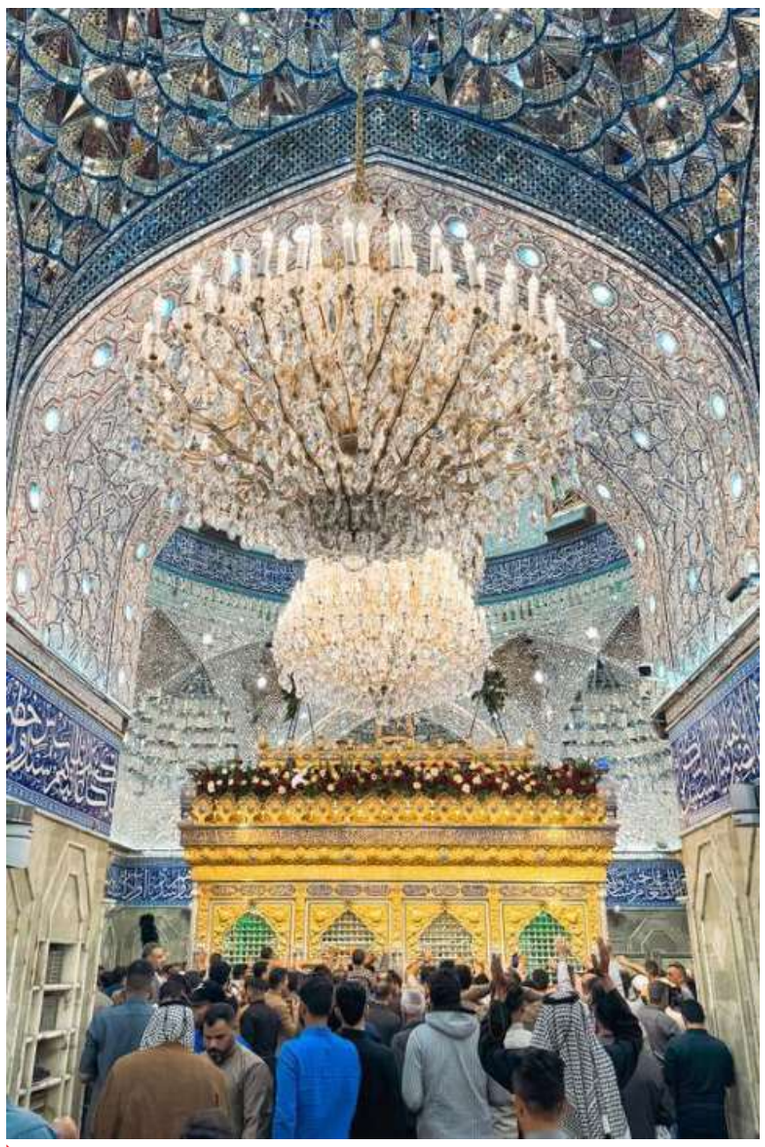
"No you did it," was the artist's response.

Guernica is largely considered one of the most powerful anti-war artworks of the 20th century. It is also a slice of Spain's eventful, bloodied history, which saw cultural wars, colonial conquests and fascist rule over centuries. Behind the rise of fascism in Spain lies "a nostalgia for empire", says Aatish Taseer in *A Return to Self: Excursions in Exile*. In his essay on Spain, 'The Ghosts of Al-Andalus', Taseer takes the reader through the deep historical roots of the violence Picasso saw in Guernica in the 1930s. There are three societies in the world – Spain, the Balkans and India – that saw "centuries of Muslim rule over large swathes of an unconverted population," he notes. "For some 900 years, Spain was a plural society. And then, around the early 1600, it was not. What changed?" asks Taseer. He seeks answers through his travels, connecting '*reconquista*' to the rise of fascism in the 20th century, and the eventual joining of Spain in "the spirit of liberalism".

Point of no return

A Return to Self is a collection of his travel writings in which Taseer seeks both answers for historical puzzles and questions about his own identity. A British citizen by birth, Taseer mostly grew up in India with his mother's family. In November 2019, the Indian government revoked Taseer's Overseas Citizenship of India, a few months after he wrote a cover story in *Time* magazine calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi "India's Divider in Chief". The article "enraged the Prime Minister", points out Taseer, whose father was Salman Taseer, the Pakistani businessman and politician, who was assassinated in 2011 by his bodyguard for defending a Christian woman accused of blasphemy. "I had been recast as an outsider, an alien, a Pakistani. It was a judgement from where there was no reprieve," writes Taseer.

Taseer, who writes for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, "began to travel seriously even before the Modi government seized my OCI". All essays in the book, except the introduction where he writes about his loss of the OCI, were written for *T Magazine*. In the book, he brings in a connecting theme of searching for identity while in exile. "Exile is a writer's natural state," Taseer, who lives in New York with his husband, quotes writer Jeet Thayil as saying. Taseer follows this dictum in his essays. But his travels are a choice he made, while exile is a wound many are forced to bear.



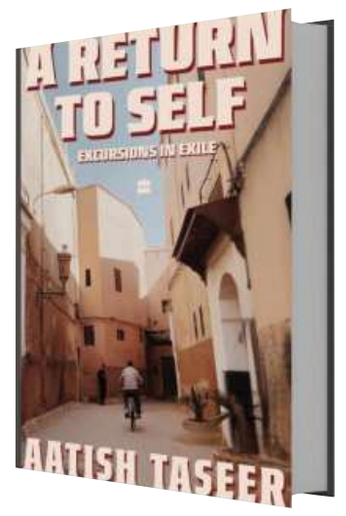
Pilgrims at Karbala, Iraq; and (top) protesters marching through the streets of La Paz, Bolivia; both countries find a mention in Aatish Taseer's book. (GETTY IMAGES)

A home in words

Taseer writes as if words were his first homeland. "Within perfume, there had always existed the category of 'orientals,' related to strong smells such as musk and civet, but at certain times, in the history of European perfume, those smells had become the site of aversion and repugnance, as well as attraction and fantasy," he says, bringing Edward Said into perfumery. In Mexico, he uses the metaphor of food to understand the ideas of native and invasive. In Istanbul, like V.S. Naipaul, who is excessively quoted in the book, Taseer is "going back many times to the same place" to see the changes. In Bolivia, Mongolia and Iraq, he is a secular pilgrim watching over Catholic festivals, Buddhist imaginations and Shia commemorations.

Taseer says he was always fascinated by the idea of pilgrimage, which connects someone with a distant homeland, which took people out of their homes to faraway cultural destinations. Taseer lives in the West. His bond with India is cultural – a place where he grew up, a place which he longs for, the homeland of his mother. Yet, the idea of the loss of India turns him into a pilgrim. He travels not as a wanderer or a tourist but as someone seeking kinship, with people, histories, and memories of belonging.

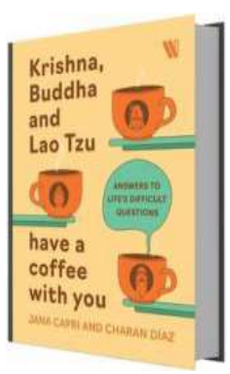
While the beauty of Taseer's language, lush and evocative, will captivate the reader, at times, the essays seem to disappear beneath the weight of their own language. Turkey has witnessed massive political and social changes in the past quarter century, ever since the rise of Islamists under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But Taseer has carefully maintained a neutral political tone throughout the book. It works when he talks about Mongolia or the Andes, but the absence of politics is too stark in chapters about Turkey or Uzbekistan. In the case of the latter, while the communist past of Uzbekistan is attacked, the country's present is left untouched. By contrast, the essays on Spain, Mongolia, Iraq and Bolivia reveal Taseer at his most compelling. Here, his lyrical command of the language blends effortlessly with his journalistic curiosity and sharp observation to tell the historically layered stories of these societies through deeply personal encounters.



A Return to Self: Excursions in Exile
Aatish Taseer
HarperCollins
₹499

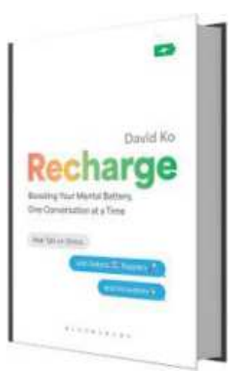
Krishna, Buddha and Lao Tzu have a coffee with you

Jana Capri, Charan Diaz
Westland Books
₹499
Through "three of the wisest people in human history: Krishna, Buddha and Lao Tzu", two writers ask questions about persistent concerns like anxiety, depression, and relationships.



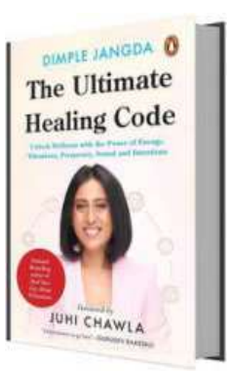
Recharge: Boosting Your Mental Battery, One Conversation at a Time

David Ko
Bloomsbury India
₹350
A tech entrepreneur speaks to musicians, sportspersons, tech honchos, among others, to understand the profound effects of stress and the way forward.



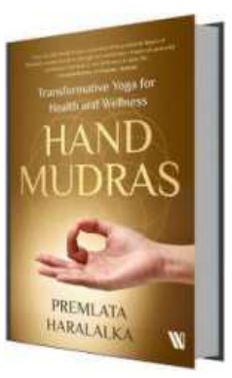
The Ultimate Healing Code

Dimple Jangda
Ebury Press
₹499
In the sequel to her bestseller, *Heal Your Gut, Mind and Body*, Jangda unravels the "five Ds" of mental health, showing readers how to "disconnect, de-stress, detox, decompress, and decode" the mind. She shares dietary and healing protocols.



Hand Mudras

Premlata Haralalka
Westland Books
₹399
This volume offers over 70 illustrated *mudras* (hand gestures) which channel energy and restore mental health balance. It provides targeted solutions for stress, anxiety, and more. Haralalka has made it her mission to spread the word on ancient wellness practices.



CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

20 YEARS OF THE RTI ACT

However, India's former chief information commissioner Satyanand Mishra says that there is a "disproportionate emphasis" on the role of the information commissions. "The actual work takes place at a much lower level – that of the public information officer's [PIO] who replies to the petitions. Unless we get a statistical overview of how many such applications were filed and in how many cases satisfactory information was shared within the promised period of 30 days, it is difficult to really get a picture of the health of the RTI Act," he adds.

Drawing from experience, Mishra talks about how PIOs often feel 'reluctant' to carry out this work because providing information under RTI is over and above the other duties they must discharge in their official capacities. There is no incentive or allowance for handling RTI applications. Instead, there is the 'threat' of penalty up to ₹25,000 in cases of giving incorrect, incomplete, or misleading information or not giving information within the specified time.

Amending the Act

According to Nayak of CHRI, public authorities continue to resist the idea of transparency and favour information disclosure only on a 'need to know' basis. "The struggle to make every citizen matter in the decision-making process has not yielded positive results even after two decades of implementation of the RTI Act," he says.

The very first attempt to amend the RTI Act was made in less than a year of the law's enactment. In 2006, a Cabinet-level proposal to exclude file notings (written comments, opinions or recommendations recorded on a government file by officials during the decision-making process) from the law's purview was ultimately shelved due to civil society's opposition.

However, two amendments were passed over the last five years, both with wide-ranging ramifications for the Act, say experts. In 2019, Parliament amended the law to give the Union government the power to set salaries and service conditions of Information Commissioners who head the RTI appeal bodies at both the Central and State levels. Critics say that this amendment compromises the operational autonomy of information commissions, which are statutory bodies created under the law.

And in 2023, Parliament passed the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act through which an amendment was brought to the RTI Act. The amendment allows PIOs to withhold sharing personal information without any exception, including the larger public interest. The DPDP Act is yet to be fully enforced.

This issue has gained political steam. While the Congress Party-led opposition has demanded that this amendment be rolled back, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Central government has defended the move by saying that there is a need for "harmonious provisions between the right to information and the right to privacy".

When people interact with the government in daily life, they do not realise the extent to which they could possibly get information about their concerns. From that point of view, RTI literacy is very important

TANMAY SINGH
Advocate, New Delhi

Future lies with the young

Over the years, the RTI Act has given rise to a distinct group of transparency activists and campaigners who continue to file applications on issues of public good and create awareness around the law.

Activist Pankti Jog is the executive secretary of the Ahmedabad-based Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahel. The organisation has been running an RTI phone helpline (also available on WhatsApp) since 2006. It has received an estimated seven lakh calls till now, mostly asking for help with filing applications or second appeals, says Jog, 50.

In 2008, the organisation also launched a unique 'RTI on Wheels' initiative, wherein a van with pamphlets travels to various States to create awareness. They also run a Saturday legal clinic in Ahmedabad, which sees a high number of walk-ins for filing RTI applications on urban civic issues. "People in various housing societies in Ahmedabad face problems with basic issues such as poor approach roads, water supply, or garbage disposal. When nothing happens after complaining to local authorities, they file RTIs," says Jog. With her organisation's help, residents of a locality in Ahmedabad managed to get information on poor drinking water supply in their neighbourhood following which the authorities intervened to resolve the issue.

Hundreds of kilometres away in Hyderabad, Kareem Ansari works as a project manager for a platform called YouRTI, run by Hyderabad-based not-for-profit Yugantar. The portal allows users to file RTI pleas for free and anonymously, if needed. At last count, more than 13,600 RTIs have been filed on the portal, with most in Ansari's name to protect the real petitioners' identity.

"We weed out pleas that impinge on personal reputations. Our only goal is to help people seek accountability," says Ansari, more involved in governance, including at the state level, according to Vibodh Parthasarathi, associate professor at Centre for Culture, Media and Governance at Jamia Millia Islamia. "There is enthusiasm and a degree of responsibility about participation in the governance process, more than earlier," he says.

In Bengaluru, Vinay Kumar, founder of the 'Reclaim Constitution' project, holds sessions with college students on the relevance of Constitutional values. Apart from encouraging them to get voter ID cards, Kumar also talks to the youngsters about using the RTI Act. "We guide them on how to file RTI applications and ask them to be specific in their queries," says the 40-year-old.

Meanwhile, back in Begumpur, Delhi, Ashok Kumar is wrapping up his RTI awareness session and making a list of petitions to follow up on. When asked what he thinks about the future of the Act, Kumar says that most people are disillusioned with the law but the poor do not have that privilege. "We have seen the law since it came into force. Yes, it has weakened over the years but the only way to strengthen it is to make sure that the average citizen continues using it," says Kumar, who has filed more than 5,000 RTI applications over the years.

The writer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.

(Far left) Ashok Kumar and Suman Devi of Satark Nagrik Sangathan conduct an RTI awareness session in New Delhi. (ANUJA)

For the poor, RTI has become a weapon to fight corruption and red-tape at community levels... Yes, it has weakened over the years but the only way to strengthen it is to make sure that the average citizen continues using it

ASHOK KUMAR
Community manager, Satark Nagrik Sangathan

Studies have shown that in nearly 50% cases, people get the information sought when they file an RTI plea. It has really helped in asking for information on basic rights like ration, pension, water and sanitation

ANJALI BHARDWAJ
Co-convenor, National Campaign for People's Right to Information

41. Most of his recent activity on social media platforms Instagram and X is around dissemination of information received through RTI applications. "RTI's future lies in the hands of young people. They should use the law in the right way and with the right spirit," he adds.

Young people want to be

PRICKLY TRUTHS IN THE AGE OF AI

Filmmaker Kiran Rao and indie director Aranya Sahay on their film *Humans in the Loop* and the cost of being misread

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury
ayaan.paul@thehindu.co.in

Aranya Sahay's *Humans in the Loop* begins with a sweet little porcupine rustling through tall grass. The image of a girl and the animal sharing a hush is tactile and intimate, and that image sets the tone for the film, shot in Jharkhand's Sarugarhi village.

Mumbai-based Sahay recalls, "I saw Dhaanu walk behind something in the forest, a quill popping from her side, and I realised it was a porcupine." The image arrived during a period of meditation while he was writing, before it migrated into the script as a motif. A shy creature, both defensive and tender, always in negotiation with the world around it, the porcupine became the film's compass.

Humans in the Loop follows Nehma (Sonal Madhushankar), an Oraon Adivasi woman who returns to her village in Jharkhand after a broken marriage and takes up work at a local AI data-labelling centre. Her 12-year-old daughter Dhaanu (Ridhima Singh) wants to live with her father in Ranchi but Nehma wants custody. Between those two desires, Sahay attempts to study what labour does to both knowledge and love.

The film premiered at the 2024 MAMI Mumbai Film Festival and later screened at the International Film Festival of Kerala, sharing the FIPRESCI India Grand Prix award with Payal Kapadia's Cannes Grand Prix winner *All We Imagine as Light*.

It has since been a part of the conversation on how indie cinema can push techno-political debates into public view. But indies rarely reach the theatres. This year though, a handful have got screen time, owing to perhaps the fewer number of Hindi film releases and also to the industry biggies backing these small gems.

Movers and shakers

Kiran Rao, whose *Laapataa Ladies* was India's Oscar entry last year, came on board Sahay's film as executive producer, along with filmmaker Biju Toppo. "What drew me to *Humans in the Loop* was the timeliness and relevance of this conversation, and Aranya's craft as a filmmaker," Rao says.

Her involvement is part of an effort to get regional, socially-minded films out of festival circuits and into theatres/platforms. She cites the Amazon Prime release of Karan Tejpal's *Stolen* (2023), on which she's an executive producer, as evidence of audience appetite.

"The same people who watch big blockbusters are also the ones who make indie films trend when they finally go on streaming... There are still a lot of people out there championing stories worth telling. Last month alone, we've had *Humans in the Loop*, *Boong*, *Sabar Bonda*, and *Bad Girl* – that's a sign. Change is slow, but once it begins, it can be transformative. I'll always be an optimist and say it's happening," Rao adds.

Folk trails

Sahay traces the seed of his film to journalist Karishma Mehrotra's 2022 essay 'Human Touch' (published on *Fifty Two* portal), which reported on data-labelling centres in Jharkhand, but he "didn't want to make a journalistic film", he says. Data labelling is when context or categories are added to raw data for Machine Learning. "I wanted to imagine what it means to live in that world, and what kind of stories and relationships it creates."

A political science and Film and Television Institute of India graduate, Sahay recalls how his conversations with Adivasi women, anthropologists, and filmmakers like Toppo and Seral Murmu shaped the film's texture. "Philomena *ji* [wife of Padma Shri environmentalist Bulu Imam] told me, 'When I walk on grass, I thank it for letting me walk.' That philosophy enters your film whether you write it or not." The Adivasi myth of creation that informs the film's core philosophy – of an earthworm burrowing land out of a water world – came from an oral story he heard.

Absence of neutrality

Over a crisp 72 minutes, Sahay stages the persistence of Nehma's everyday tasks. The film's drama hinges on what labels do when they are aggregated and when local knowledge bumps against remote expectations. One sequence crystallises the problem: shown a leaf-eating worm, Nehma refuses to mark it a "pest", because in her understanding, the creature helps the ecosystem. Her manager Alka (Gita Guha) instructs strict compliance – "put the labels the clients want to see". Sahay says, "I don't see AI as a neutral entity at all... there are existing structures within the world which will seep into algorithms." Still, he resists a fatalistic reading. For many families, the arrival of data-labelling work has had material value and incomes.

Rao sees the question of vision as both structural and philosophical. "In algorithms, the bias is data-driven and depends on the datasets an AI is trained on," she says. "In cinema, it's more *ad hoc* – driven by the mix of people who get to make films."

The film's moral horizon lies in AI pioneer Geoffrey Hinton's exit from Google in 2023, warning that humanity might be outpaced by its own invention. "A mother responding to a child comes from empathy. If we can pass that empathy into what we build, maybe it will take care of us. But if it's only business interests driving it, then humanity will suffer." Sahay says, "I wanted humanity at the centre."

Last month alone, we've had (theatrical releases of) *Humans in the Loop*, *Boong*, *Sabar Bonda*, and *Bad Girl* – that's a sign. Change is slow, but once it begins, it can be transformative

KIRAN RAO
Executive producer, *Humans in the Loop*

Small wonder (Clockwise from left) Sonal Madhushankar in a film still; director Aranya Sahay (left) at the camera; and Kiran Rao. (COURTESY ARANYA SAHAY/ GETTY IMAGES)

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

DEAR TOURIST FRIENDS, WE WELCOME YOU ALL FOR LADAKH'S TOURISM SEASON!
VRROOOM!
DEAR TOURIST FRIENDS, WE URGE YOU TO APPEAL AGAINST THE DISENFRANCHISEMENT OF LADAKHIS, THE CORPORATE TAKEOVER OF OUR LANDS, AND THE IMMINENT THREATS TO OUR FRAGILE ECOLOGY AND HERITAGE.
OM MA NI PADME HUM!

Bittu Sahgal

TRIBUTE | 1934 - 2025

JANE GOODALL

THE HARBINGER OF HOPE

The enduring legacy of a primatologist who worked equally hard for wild animals and a climate-safe world

Awards and honours far too numerous to list have been showered on the universally loved Jane Goodall, primatologist and animal rights campaigner, who passed away on October 1 aged 91. One recognition, however, she did not but *should* have received is the Nobel Prize for Peace. For all her life, Goodall worked for peace and harmony not just between humans but between *Homo sapiens* and all life on Earth.

Her own words best describe the start of her seven-decade journey to convince humanity to protect our magical planet: *'If you are interested in animals,' someone said to me about a month after my arrival in Africa, 'then you should meet Dr. Leakey.' I had already started on a somewhat dreary office job, since I had not wanted to overstay my welcome at my friend's farm. I went to see Louis Leakey at what is now the National Museum of natural history in Nairobi, where at that same time he was Curator. Somehow he must have sensed that my interest in animals was not just a passing phase, but was rooted deep, for on the spot he gave me a job as an assistant secretary.*

First encounter

I never got to meet Goodall, but she entered *my* life in 1966, six years after she began her work with the legendary Louis Leaky in Tanzania's Gombe Stream National Park, when the *National Geographic* magazine placed her on their cover. Down the years, I could not help but compare her to the *other* Jane... Tarzan's Jane, about whom she recently said with an impish smile: "Tarzan married the wrong Jane." Her fascination for Africa and chimpanzees was undoubtedly influenced by her love for 'Tarzan of the Apes' and his sidekick *Cheeta* the chimpanzee. Her version was a stuffed toy Chimp named Mr. H. "[He] goes everywhere with me. We've been to 59 countries together and he's probably been touched by about nearly 4 million people," she once said.

In 1978, I bought a large format pictorial book, *Savage Africa*, authored by Hugo van Lawick, only to discover that Goodall was Lawick's former wife and they had jointly put together a book in 1971, *Innocent Killers*, with words by Goodall and photographs by Lawick. The detailed descriptions of hunts by carnivores (hyenas, cheetahs, leopards) were graphic and gory, but they conveyed an elemental truth: unlike humans, wild animals were not 'cruel' as judged by ethical human standards. Animals ate what they killed. Nothing went to waste.

Blazing a trail

Goodall showed the world that it was possible to love animals (she likes dogs more than chimps!). She told us that chimps lived in societies akin to ours and used tools to access food, an ability thus far attributed *only* to humans. And, they had distinct personalities. Some, like one individual she named David Greybeard, displayed likeable traits, while some were unlikeable, even cannibalistic. None of these field observations came easy. It took years to win the trust of the chimps, never hiding from them until she became a part of the non-threatening backdrop, a harmless pale-coloured ape. No naturalist had ever attempted this before. The most important of all her observations was the ability of apes to insert twigs into termite nests, pull them out repeatedly with ants attached and consume as food. When Leaky saw evidence of this from images, he sent this now-famous telegram to his protégé: "NOW WE MUST REDEFINE TOOL STOP REDEFINE MAN STOP OR ACCEPT CHIMPANZEES AS HUMAN".

In 2021, Sanctuary Nature Foundation conferred on Jane Goodall the Sanctuary Wildlife Legend Award for her life's work studying chimpanzees in the 1960s amid hardships and challenges. (GETTY IMAGES)

Over the years, Goodall faced considerable opposition, largely by testosterone-driven males who questioned both her capability and ability to survive in the rough-and-tumble world of Africa's jungle life. Her mother, nevertheless, travelled all the way to be with her young daughter as the attitude of men spurred her on to achieve and discover more, and cut a trail not merely in Africa but clean through academia in England.

Misplaced criticism

She was also the target of misplaced criticism from human rights activists who accused her of protecting apes at the cost of local human communities. Working in a male-dominated sector in her early days, she was unfairly criticised for being an amateur with anthropomorphic biases that ended up superimposing human attributes and capabilities onto wild apes.

A decade ago, some academics pointed out that a manuscript of hers, for *Seeds of Hope* (2013), omitted crediting sources. Emily Brelage of DePauw University wrote, "It's important to not ignore the flaws that make them [admired heroes] human, while we celebrate what makes them great." With characteristic grace, Goodall said she would delay publication with added credits, saying, "I hope it is obvious that my only objective was to learn as much as I could so that I could provide straightforward factual information."

She never needed to respond to the accusations of anthropomorphic biases because in 1965, Newnham College in Cambridge University settled the issue by accepting her deeply scientific doctoral thesis titled 'The Behaviour of Free-living Chimpanzees in the Gombe Stream Reserve'. Valerie Jane Morris Goodall was now Dr. Jane Goodall.

To the human rights activists, she responded: protecting the apes' jungles was in the interests of the African people whose jungles were being brutally colonised by the industrial North.

Even today, the developed world continues to trot out arguments to justify deforestation, a primary cause of our current climate crisis. In my book, that amounts to intergenerational colonisation. In her last days, Goodall travelled the globe, met young and old, villagers and power brokers, urging them to rein in carbon, protect the biosphere, and leave our children a climate-safe world.

She was met everywhere with what can only be called veneration. Goodall did her job on Planet Earth by re-emphasising conclusively what Charles Darwin had posted on November 24, 1859, the day his controversial book *On the Origin of Species* was published, that chimps' brains were capable of using tools, a fact that scientists of the day refused to accept. Both suffered severe criticism from religious quarters that believed *only* humans had souls, and were given dominion over all other life by 'the creator'. What's more, she sprinkled us with the magic of hope with the example of a life well lived.

The writer is editor of Sanctuary Asia *and founder of Sanctuary Nature Foundation.*

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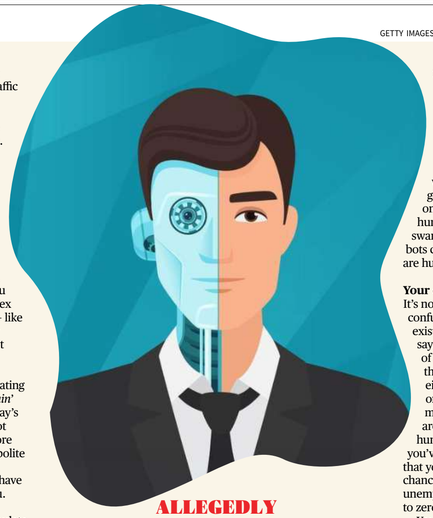


ALLEGEDLY

So what if you're a bot?

The chances you'll ever be unemployed just went down to zero

Did you know that 52% of all web traffic is bots? Which means, if you're reading this online, you are more likely a bot than a human. And yet, how many of you have actually taken a test to find out?

Actually, most of you have. It's called the CAPTCHA – Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. Once upon a time, CAPTCHAs were easy. You solved moderately complex mathematical problems – like 11 plus 22 – to prove your humanity. But this did not last.

Thanks to AI, the bot population exploded, creating a humans '*khatre mein hain*' (in danger) situation. Today's bots are sophisticated. Not only do they know far more than you, they are more polite than you, and if you are Indian, chances are they have more civic sense than you.

All kinds of hyper-intelligent bots populate the web now. Some click on YouTube videos, watch them, and even leave comments, to deliver 'engagement' to their owners. Some trawl the web collecting data for their Boss Bot – not unlike humans with white collar jobs. Then there are bot politicians. Diella, a cabinet minister in Albania, is a bot. We also know for a fact that the Prime Minister of Israel is inhuman. Sadly, there are no studies on how many of the world's prime ministers and billionaire CEOs are human. Musk, for instance, could be a bot that reproduces agamogenetically. That might explain how it gave birth to Grok, a popular chatbot.

Pre-existing humans

As bots grew powerful, they began to marginalise humans, deny them access. That's why CAPTCHAs grew tougher. Gone are the days of simple addition. Recently, to access a certain government portal, I was asked to multiply my 12-digit Aadhaar number with the year of my birth and enter the square root of the product. The other day, a colleague couldn't access her DigiUpma account because she was unable to decipher the weirdly shaped letters that looked like the script of the Illuminati. Today, a CAPTCHA asked me to prove that India enjoys the rule of law and not 'bulldozer Raj'. Obviously, I failed.

With every passing day, more and more humans, including me, are failing CAPTCHAs. This could mean either that the CAPTCHAs are setting me up for failure, like re-KYCs and Aadhaar biometrics, or that I really have become a bot. I used to think the second possibility was absurd. Then I saw an Oscar-winning short film called *I am not a Robot*. It's about a woman who keeps failing CAPTCHAs. She finally takes an online test and is shocked when the result says, "There is an 87% chance you are a robot." That got me thinking.

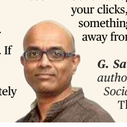
Contrary to what you see in science fiction movies, bots are not only created in AI labs. They are also manufactured by altering the brains of pre-existing humans. If you keep failing CAPTCHAs, ask yourself: have you lately been unable to resist following the herd? Do you only watch, like and share what other bots recommend? Do you only say, do, and think what is permitted as per your programming? By the way, that's how virality is generated. Stuff goes viral only when millions of humans behave like a bot swarm or when millions of bots convince everybody they are humans.

Your clicks matter

It's not uncommon to be confused about your existential status. Wikipedia says most bots don't think of themselves as bots – they believe they are either human or of divine origin. It's also a misconception that bots are somehow inferior to humans. On the contrary! If you've recently discovered that you're a bot, rejoice. The chances you'll ever be unemployed just went down to zero.

You can also stop worrying about dying. You'll probably become obsolete at some point, which is far less dramatic than dying. Unlike humans, who can never be sure if they will be reincarnated as a human or as a cockroach, you can rest assured you'll keep coming back as a superior upgrade of your earlier self, for all eternity.

Even if you believe in your heart of hearts that you really are human, and it's unfair to be branded a bot simply on the basis of a CAPTCHA, fret not. Except for your awareness of the truth about yourself, nothing changes. Your life (or what you consider 'your life') can continue as before. Out on the Internet, no one knows, or cares, if you are a human or a bot or a dog. What matters are your clicks, and that is something nobody can take away from you.



G. Sampath, *the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor,* The Hindu.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

UNPACKING THE PREFIX

From ‘unfriend’ to ‘unblouse’, we are prefixing ‘un’ to every verb, often forgetting that words build and reinforce culture

Susan Thomas

It was in 1996 that I watched Toni Braxton singing her single ‘Unbreak My Heart’ on MTV. In a theatrical video, she sang: *unbreak my heart... undo the hurt you’ve caused... uncry these tears*. Apart from the soul-churning vocals, the lyrics were an innovative use of the prefix ‘un’, which we discussed in our literature class back in college.

Two decades later, we are prefixing ‘un’ to every verb, thanks to Instagramese, a modern hieroglyphics of words, emojis, hashtags and symbols popularised for, of and by socials. In August, when U.K. food blogger Jake Dryan called his Instagram followers to join him, along with Amsterdam-based entrepreneur Manasi Khanna, to ‘un-curry’ Indian food, reservations sold out in a matter of minutes. Khanna, who hosts supper clubs, had just launched ‘un-curry’ to celebrate the diversity of Indian cuisine beyond the curry and she roped in Dryan for the first table. There is unLecture, a Delhi-based community that brings academic lectures to cafes and bars. You can unpack heavy topics with two pints of beer here.

‘Unfriend’ was chosen as OUP’s word of the year in 2009 on the grounds that it had “lex-appeal” – both “currency and potential longevity”. In an age where Instagram makes heavily filtered photographs all the rage, the unfiltered ones choose to stand naked in their pigmented truth and pores. #Unbox, #unblouse, #unlearn, #unpack, #unmute, #unpopularopinion, there is no stopping content creators who have set themselves the task of prefixing an ‘un’ with every set cultural item.

Complex online protocols

Instagram and TikTok have made unboxing a woke genre of content, complete with ASMR, swivel shots and stop motion. Unboxing is the subtle art of opening a package so as to reveal the product within. It could be called opening the box or ‘openbox’, yet it is ‘unbox’ that is the preferred nomenclature of influencers, whose anti-normative vocabulary builds cool content and virality.

Take, for instance, #unblouse, in which sari wearers are embracing unconventional blouse pairings with their six yards. Full sleeved shirts, peplum tops, crop tops, *kurtas/kurtis*, bandeau tops – all are worked with new sari drapes. It seeks to reinvent the sari with a modern twist, one blouse at a time.

‘Unblouse’ also calls attention to the pre-colonial era when women were largely seen without blouses. The blouse, unblousers say, was the result of Victorian prudishness and a colonial project of clothing the bare-bodied native. ‘Unblouse’ is decolonisation.

The digital ecosystem has given the language ‘unfollow’, ‘unfriend’, ‘unsubscribe’ and ‘uninstal’ as self-righteous acts in setting boundaries and taking a firm stand on toxic personalities, even if that means your mum. If one senses danger or discomfort or both, one can always block on one app but leave the other open to say sorry. As relationships navigate complex online protocols and etiquettes, an unblocking and unmuting can mean a thaw in the frozen relationship.

Green and red flags

There is a tedium that is now setting in (if not already) on social media networks that have largely become an extension of capitalist-consumerist machines. There is an intellectual vacuum in the narrative as nuance has long left the chat.

For instance, ‘unblouse’ often talks of how women in pre-colonial India never wore blouses, without going into the vexatious history of caste-based clothing rights or the limited public role of women then. It never looks at historical evidence like the Ajanta paintings where women are seen in structured bodices. It paints the life of yore as sensuous, wistfully remembering *sola sringaar, ubtans* and elaborate baths without going into the oppression of women and denial of their right to education and work.

The whole shebang about toxic-and-hence unfriending and unfollowing has led to a culture that demonises ‘peopling’ and glorifies in-room vegetative state – in-the-bed-always, eating, working, watching and texting. In a modern version of cave (wo)man – with gadgets – things get delivered to our doorstep in the blink of an eye, with instructions to ‘not ring the bell’ or ‘leave at the door’. We internalise pop quotes on ‘green flags’ and ‘red flags’ and look for the slightest excuse to ‘unlove’ or feel ‘unloveable’. The tragedy about relationships that begin and end on digital screens is that we seldom give a real chance to real people.

The new narrative emerging after unpacking the old one needs to set in place a more nuanced one that recognises the human need for connection and conviviality in the post-truth, post-pandemic world. As language evolves to reconcile with the demands of the many platforms – word limits, AI slop and reduced attention span – we need to question how much we should ‘undo’. Cultural experiences and expressions change with the times, but whether it is a performance dance for social media or a genuine need of the hour is up for debate.

The writer is a career civil servant and a creator on Instagram.

GOREN BRIDGE

Avoidance play

Neither vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

Today’s deal is from “The Rodwell Files”, an excellent book on declarer play written by Eric Rodwell. East overtakes the jack-of-hearts lead with the queen, implying length and strength in the heart suit. South wins with his king because he does not want East, the danger hand, to lead a diamond through him. Declarer has eight tricks and he hopes to put West on lead at some point and force him to lead a diamond. The West hand must be set up for this endplay while keeping East off lead. The bidding doesn’t make sense unless West has both the king and queen of spades, so South should play him for those cards. South should lead a spade at trick two. Should West play low, South should rise with dummy’s ace, cash five clubs and the ace of hearts, and then exit with a spade to West. West can cash another spade, but then must lead a diamond giving South his ninth trick.

NORTH
♠ A 9 6 4
♡ A 6 5
◇ 2
♣ A K J 10 5

WEST
♠ K Q 5
♡ J 2
◇ A Q J 9 8 7
♣ 8 7

EAST
♠ J 10 8 3
♡ Q 10 9 8 4
◇ 3
♣ 6 3 2

SOUTH
♠ 7 2
♡ K 7 3
◇ K 10 6 5 4
♣ Q 9 4

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1◇	Dbl	1♡	1NT
2◇	3NT	All pass	

Opening lead: Jack of ♡

Should West split his spade honors at trick two, South plays low from dummy, wins the presumed heart continuation with dummy’s ace, and crosses to his hand with the nine of clubs. A second spade from South gives West the same choice. If West plays his other honor, South lets him hold the trick. South can now win the presumed spade continuation, run his clubs, and lead a diamond to his 10. West is again forced to give South his ninth trick. Beautiful play, but hard to see at the table.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has October 12 ever given us

By what name is this festival now known, where more than seven million litres of beer are drunk?
GETTY IMAGES

Berty Ashley

1 On October 12, 1609, Thomas Ravenscroft, a musician, published ‘Deuteromelia’. It was a book of music that included a children’s rhyme referring to the mistreatment of some rodents. What rhyme is this, whose melody, since then, has become a staple part of popular culture?

2 On October 12, 1810, the city of Munich held a huge celebration for the wedding of Crown Prince Louis of Bavaria and Princess Therese. Thousands of people came together to watch a horse race and listen to a choir, and the event evolved into an annual festival. Still going strong, by what name is this festival now known, where more than seven million litres of beer are drunk?

3 On October 12, 1823, Charles Macintosh of Scotland began selling what became known as ‘Macs’. Macs were created by dissolving rubber in coal-tar naphtha, and making it hydrophilic in nature. What item of clothing is a Mac?

4 Born on October 12, 1868, August Horch was a German blacksmith who established an automobile company in 1910. If ‘Horch’ is German for ‘Listen’, what is the Latin translation that became the company name?

5 On October 12, 1901, Theodore Roosevelt officially renamed what until then had been known as the ‘Executive Mansion’. Its nickname had come into use because of the lime-based paint used to protect the porous sandstone it was built with. What name is now known worldwide?

6 On October 12, 1915, this company became the first to manufacture its 1 millionth automobile at the River Rouge plant in Detroit. Which company reached this remarkable feat, thanks to its innovative ‘assembly line’ technology?

7 Born October 12, 1929, Magnus Magnusson was an Iceland-born journalist for the BBC. He attained global acclaim for hosting an iconic quiz show for 25 years. The Indian version of the show was hosted by the ‘godfather of Indian TV quizzing’, Siddhartha Basu. What show gave us the phrase “I’ve started, so I’ll finish?”

8 On October 12, 1931, this iconic statue was opened to the public. Standing 30 metres high (98 ft.) on top of Mount Corcovado, it was first conceived of in 1850 by a Catholic priest. What statue is this that, as of 2007, is part of a select group of monuments?

9 Born on October 12, 1968, in Sydney, this actor and singer is one of the most recognisable entertainers in the industry. Having started off his career as a clown, he was nominated for an Oscar award and went on to win a Grammy Award as well. Who is this actor, best known for playing an *X-Man*?

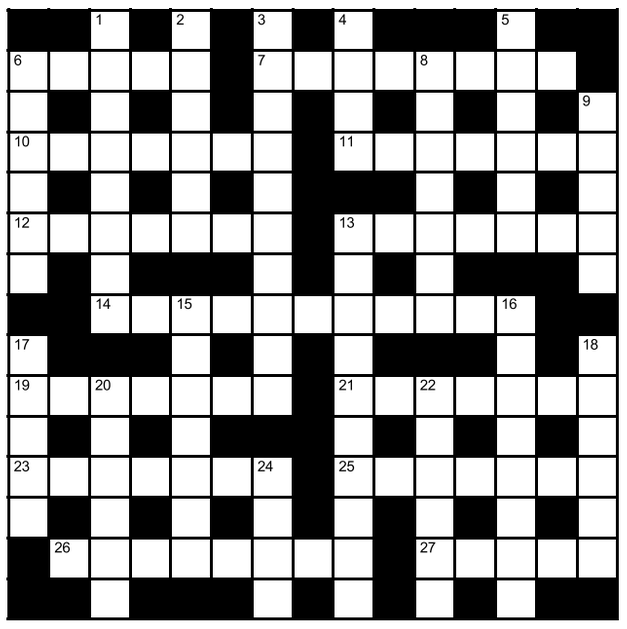
10 On October 12, 1994, this film studio was founded by director Steven Spielberg, former Disney executive Jeffrey Katzenberg, and music executive David Geffen. It soon became one of the most successful animation studios of all time, thanks to the success of *Shrek*. What company’s logo depicts a boy fishing on the moon?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called ‘Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion’. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Three Blind Mice
2. Oktoberfest
3. Raincoat
4. Audi
5. The White House
6. Ford
7. Mastermind
8. Christ the Redeemer statue
9. Hugh Jackman
10. DreamWorks

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 25 (Set by Bruno)



Across

6 Customer of Uber travelling with Waymo, essentially (5)
7 Uranium and oxygen found in liquid, impure metal (8)
10 Grill *memsahib* a chicken slice (7)
11 African city’s existing Radical Left arrested in first half of year (7)
12 Parked cars often held following beer smuggling in Vermont (7)
13 Plain couple that is heading to Raleigh is boring (7)
14 Company party returning on one condition - all team and executive leaders to work together (11)
19 Spy slinking around block with head of agency - they usually come out at night (7)
21 After Spanish snack give extra money on counter with soft sound (3-1-3)
23 Setter’s beloved American power! (7)
25 Navy entered Palestinian land chasing gold and silk-like material (7)
26 One with college degree raged at organisation over unemployment mainly (8)
27 Country’s name etched in clothing (5)

Down

1 Extremely shady man — upperclass conservative — fired rural representative (8)
2 A great deal of ricotta is rendered with fabric made with wool (6)
3 Original inhabitants rinsed and cleaned, I assumed (3,7)
4 Boring 12 months, lacking hint of anything good coming up (4)
5 Stove’s rough edge catching knee regularly (6)
6 What gets him going in struggle? Mostly conduct (6)
8 American pressure to acquire black gold used up in proportion (3,4)
9 X’s supported by extremists in elitist rule (5)
13 Dismissed rings echoing over bed, covering face (4-6)
15 Pound, counterfeited without crux of data gets restricted (7)
16 Old person breaking pinata regularly’s a champion (8)
17 Insect in photograph identified (5)
18 Handicrafts making a comeback at spinning classes (6)
20 Judiciary cleared restricting copyright for joke? (6)
22 Revealing clothes hiding hard leg muscles, showing middle of hamstring (6)
24 Hard tissue of abs chiseled at the top after cycling (4)

SOLUTION NO. 24

■	P	O	W	E	R	B	R	E	A	K	F	A	S	T
B	■	B	■	X	■	U	■	A	■	A	■	D	■	E
A	D	E	P	T	■	L	O	S	A	L	A	M	O	S
N	■	I	■	R	■	L	■	E	■	A	■	I	■	T
D	I	S	T	A	F	F	■	S	U	M	A	T	R	A
I	■	A	■	■	■	I	■	■	■	A	■	■	■	T
T	E	N	C	H	■	N	I	E	T	Z	S	C	H	E
■	■	C	■	O	■	C	■	S	■	O	■	A	■	■
C	H	E	A	P	S	H	O	T	■	O	O	M	P	H
A	■	■	■	S	■	■	■	R	■	■	■	E	■	A
V	E	S	I	C	L	E	■	A	R	T	E	M	I	S
E	■	I	■	O	■	R	■	D	■	Y	■	B	■	S
M	E	T	A	T	A	R	S	I	■	I	D	E	A	L
A	■	A	■	C	■	O	■	O	■	N	■	R	■	E
N	O	R	T	H	E	R	N	L	I	G	H	T	S	■

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

For seniors, minefields in the digital landscape

Exploring the challenges faced by them in the cyberworld, from OTPs and biometrics to Captcha, IVR, and chatbots

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It all started with a young girl offering me her seat on an airport bus. The simple gesture hit me hard. I had always assumed that my silver hair exuded only experience and wisdom. Little did I realise that for Gen Z, I was history – a fast-disappearing remnant of the analogue era. I had always believed that I was an outlier, with general rules of ageing not applicable.

Recalling my encounters in the digital world, I wonder how other septuagenarians handle these daily happenings.

When recounting my trials and tribulations, my son and son-in-law, IT professionals, pointed out that my cohort formed part of less than 1% of users of IT services. They hinted that even the coming few generations of senior citizens would not be digital natives. "Stop being grouchy, adjust, learn – you have taken stereotactic biopsies from the brain stem; this should be fodder." Easier said than done; even if today, the basic necessities of life is "*Roti*, *kapada*, *makan*, and bandwidth".

In urban areas, most seniors use digital devices and the Internet for communication, entertainment, banking, and healthcare. Grandchildren or the alpha generation help in damage control and crisis management. In minutes, with aplomb personified, they point out that "undelete" is not possible when the WhatsApp back-up on Google drive is deleted. Sundar Pichai did not ensure a repeat prompt "Are you sure?" exclusively for seniors.

Alas these "senior moments" occur too frequently.

Tyranny of processes

One-time passwords have become a cornerstone of online security. Supplementing traditional passwords with an extra layer of security, OTPs ensure that the legitimate user alone completes a digital transaction. However, visual and motor difficulties, arthritis, tremors, and slower cognition make receiving, reading, and entering OTPs within the seconds or minutes allowed a daunting task. This leads to annoyance. OTPs could be delayed, amplifying anxiety and potentially blocking access to crucial services. Cybercriminals target seniors who are less familiar with digital processes. Urgency induced by OTP prompts is exploited. A senior-friendly design with larger text, audio readouts, simpler workflows, and accessible support channels is too much to expect.

Captcha requirements do not take into account "age-related" visual and auditory challenges and reduced motor dexterity. These make precise mouse movements or repeated typing difficult. The distorted letters and surreal backgrounds compound errors, increasing frustration. Essential transactions and even logins become a challenge. Asked why designers cannot prioritise accessibility to ensure that seniors access important online spaces and services, I was told that "it is deliberately made more difficult, to identify humans".

Authentication using fingerprint, facial recognition, iris scan or voice ensures security and convenience by verifying identity through unique biological features. For seniors, this should be less cognitively demanding than remembering passwords. However, reduced fingerprint quality occurs due to thinning skin, worn ridges, and other health conditions. Facial features change with age and medical issues. Unfamiliarity with biometric devices could be intimidating. Attempts to follow rapid instructions lead to multiple attempts and frustration.

Interactive voice response systems may be cost-effective and scalable and have privacy and security. However, most seniors find that IVRS presupposes excellent hearing, attention and concentration. Navigating menus, remembering options, and following complex instructions assumes absence of even age-related inevitable changes. Long hold times, inability to correct mistakes halfway, complex menu layers, and absence of a human increase frustration. This is exacerbated as one's particular problem does not fit into the predetermined basket. There are no shortcuts or adaptive features. Voice-based IVRS may not accurately interpret speech of elders. Accent, low voice volume, tremulousness, and reduced clarity lead to errors in information capture and subsequent process discontinuation.

AI-driven conversational agents are becoming part of our lives. For seniors at present, challenges outweigh opportunities. Complex chatbot interfaces, impaired voice recognition, and small font sizes make digital interaction difficult. Chatbots currently lack expected empathy or ability to understand a senior. The latter, not having a diploma in prompt engineering, cannot use the language expected.

IT systems have multiple layers of redundancy and back-up systems. Why do they not factor in septuagenarian usage? Perhaps, they expect us to follow Charles Darwin's adage, "It is not the strongest or the most intelligent of the species that survive, but the one most receptive to change." Does the onus of change lie only with us. With populations becoming older, should developers and policymakers not factor in arthritis and tremors? Age does not mean a thing. The best tunes are played on the oldest fiddles. If I were to be Scotch, I would be worth quite a bit.

Returning to sign language

T.V. Sreekumar
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The other day, at the bus station, I met a gentleman I knew through common friends. "Hello, how are you," I asked. He looked at me half-interested and gave the thumbs-up sign. Foolish me didn't stop at that. "Where are you going?" With a not so pleasing look, he pointed towards the north. Well, I could understand the direction, but why was he not talking?

I have been experiencing this behaviour from many for a while. Communication is leaning towards silence, and a coded language increasingly used. Talking less seems to be the norm these days, with communication conveniently becoming speechless. One is sometimes left to crack the code to understand the meaning.

A nod in its proper form can convey a yes or no, and a shiver can communicate cold, fever or irritation without speaking a word. A thumbs-up can be used for various occasions in a positive way, and thumbs-down can send the opposite message. Eyes wide can be used to show surprise, anger, and even displeasure. The language the body can convey are many, and figuring it is left to the other.

Communication on mobile phones are mostly through symbols without a word spoken. The most popular appears to be the smiley which conveys the emotion of joy with a single click. It saves time without the need to think of words to be framed and all is over with that.

The innumerable emojis now available can fit into any context if one knows their meanings. Some of my verbal communication gets replies with a symbol, which I fail to understand and leave it at that. I fail to fit into the present time when symbols and codes happen to be the order of the day. Familiar with only the smiley and thumbs-up, I sent a smiley to a friend when the occasion did not demand one. Later he asked me about it, and I confessed that it was not a full smile but in half-grief.

Calm and composed

Be mentally strong to face challenges and build resilience for a fulfilling life

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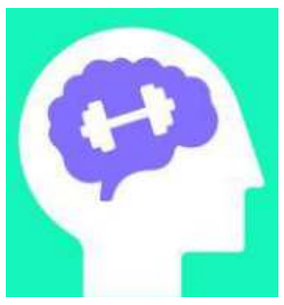
The lines "as tough as nails, a hard nut to crack" from a book got me thinking. Further reading made me realise it was not about bulging biceps or six-pack abs, but about the mental toughness of the protagonist.

How many of us have reserves of mental strength to draw upon when it is much needed?

Every day, we face several challenges in our daily lives. It may be related to poor health, dwindling finances, the daily commute, traffic chaos, power outage, vagaries of weather, job insecurity, job loss, feelings of loneliness, lack of communication, misunderstandings, and these days, even poor net connectivity. These do jolt us out of our comfort zone resulting in anxiety and stress.

The famed Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi in his poem *The Wind* alluded to this issue in a subtle manner. He describes the destructive force of the wind and says man needs to build stronger structures to withstand the force of the wind. The poet says, "So come, let's build strong homes, let's joint the doors firmly, practise to firm the body, make the heart steadfast." The poet uses the wind as an example to entreat human beings to develop inner strength to withstand challenges and difficult situations in their daily lives.



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Being mentally strong is essential to ride out the storm, to tackle the newer and never-seen-before situations and issues that tend to crop up in today's changing environment. Many of us tend to break down, blame fate, react with anger, irritation and sometimes intense rage coupled with a sense of failure and frustration. This could lead to fights, quarrels.

A sense of calmness and patience when dealing with stressful situations, a never-say-die attitude, viewing each challenging situation as a path to grow, a positive outlook when facing criticism and hurdles are steps in the right direction.

This does not mean putting up with injustice but rather not crumbling under pressure.

Taking a balanced emotional approach, destroying negative thoughts through a disciplined effort towards achieving goals, ability to bounce back from put-me-downs, attacking each issue with the confidence that success will come eventually and having a supporting network as a sort of coping mechanism are all building blocks that shape and form mental strength.

Elusive contentment

Striving for it in a world filled with comparison, envy can be challenging

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

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Everyone relishes the feeling of blissful contentment or satiety that follows a hearty meal. Yet, arguably, personal contentment is an attribute that often eludes us in other spheres of life.

Living as we do in a materialistic world where one's social standing often hinges on one's financial resources, few are ever content with what they have. We constantly hanker to be on equal terms, socially and financially, with our neighbours and peers. Any disparity is unacceptable to our egos. No matter how much we have in terms of material comforts, we hunger for more, enviously eyeing what the well-heeled have. Apparently, it's an inherent human craving that cannot be easily curbed due to our innate materialism. Indeed, as a wit put it, many speak the truth when they say that they despise riches, but they usually mean the riches of others.

Inequality and envy often fuel discontent and sustain it. We tend to compare what we have with what others have and then strive to bridge the gap. When we don't succeed, discontentment inevitably follows. As such, few are ever content with their lot, the exception perhaps being the poor who, in any case, have little or no choice in the matter.

True, one's contentment levels fluctuate in direct proportion to what one has (or doesn't have) in relation to one's peers. Thus, nothing creates more personal discontent than our eagerness to maintain social parity with (or superiority over) our peers. Trying to keep up with the Joneses socially and in other respects is best avoided; for when one thinks one has ultimately caught up with them, they usually tend to rise a notch or two higher. This often sees our levels of discontent spiral out of control.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Mental health problems are increasing due to fast-paced lifestyles, social isolation, and digital overload. ('Quick-service delivery of mental health'; Oct. 5) Greater emphasis on awareness, early screening, and timely support in schools and workplaces can create a proactive culture of emotional well-being and mental fitness in society.
N.S. Reddy

Healing the mind needs time and empathy — things no chatbot can truly offer. Technology should support, not replace, real human care.
Avinashiappan Myilsami

Mental health affects how we perceive the world around us and manage stress. Emotional, psychological, and social well-being are the influencing factors. Engaging in hobbies like sports, art, music, and spending time with pet animals can be beneficial.
N.R. Ramachandran

A call for change

The mass protests in some of our neighbouring nations, lead mostly by the youth, have been against rising corruption and authoritarianism and largely to defend democracy. ('Nepal wants more democracy', Oct. 5) Democracy in South Asia is still a work in progress and people have to remain vigilant to safeguard it.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

What former CEC S.Y. Quraishi has said is true. The youth expect more from the government. Unprecedented corruption, lack of jobs and abuse of power have led to youth uprisings in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.
Sravana Ramachandran

In the wild

The fallacy of our wildlife conservation efforts cannot be excoriated more effectively. ('Green Humour'; Oct. 5) Now, one can only hope that 'Every dog has his day'.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

Long haul

Italian Jainik Sinner and Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz are the new kids on the block and if the number of slams under their belt is any indication, they are in it for the long haul. ('The new gods of tennis'; Oct. 5) There is a yawning gap between the duo and the rest of the players in the circuit which makes it evident that their dominance will continue.
C.V. Aravind

Show of empathy

Sidin Vadukut turns a discerning eye to the perils of performative visibility. ('Face of the moment;' Oct. 5) He critiques a culture where even grave issues — wars, humanitarian crises and climate disasters — are refracted through the lens of personal branding, reducing empathy to spectacle.
Vijay Singh Adhikari

Enduring legacy

The piece beautifully explains the revival of khadi in today's sustainable landscape. ('Gandhigram Trust's khadi reset'; Oct. 5) It was heartening to read how Gandhigram Trust continues to uphold the ideals of self-reliance and eco-conscious living.
Anuradha Sowmyanarayanan

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The worth of gig work
Some people take these jobs as full-time work; others see them as a bridge to a better future
Andra Mohan Krishna

Small steps to shrink carbon footprint
Give away plants and pots as gifts for Deepavali and Pongal festivals
Lakshmi Vandana M.V.

Ear-splitting everyday
It's impossible to tune out the grating noise in the surroundings
Lakshmi R. Srinivas

Crying in silence
Losing the spouse is traumatic, resulting in loneliness, anguish, a sense of irreparable loss
Devina Albert

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

(Clockwise from left) Priyanka Chopra Jonas; goddess Manasa; *Rattan Snake* and *Infinite Sleeper*; Sean Anderson; and Radha Sollur's artwork. (CHLOE BURTON-GREEN AND GETTY IMAGES)

WHEN SERPENTI MET THE NAGAS

After Shanghai and Seoul, the immersive exhibition comes to India in a larger format to mark the Chinese Year of the Snake and over 75 years of Bvlgari's legendary 'Serpenti' collection

Deepthi Sasidharan

A 15th century Naga Sapta Naadi painting formed of seven serpentine lines represents the sevenfold divisions in the universe as a cosmic river of time and reality. Another, of a Nag-Pash Yantra, is a geometric schema of two copulating serpents from Hindu spiritual practice. The *Serpenti Infinito* exhibition by Bvlgari in Mumbai, curated by art gallery Nature Morte, offers a fascinating insight into these and other symbols of the *naga* or serpent through the historic associations and artistic traditions of India.

The *naga*, a timeless motif embodying protection and renewal, has resonated across faiths and cultural expressions in India. But what does this symbolism have to do with the Italian luxury fashion house? Well, in 1948, Bvlgari brought the mysticism of the '*serpenti*' to the world, via its iconic jewellery and watches – a story it has continued to tell through cross-cultural exhibitions, events and heritage dialogues across countries.

This show marks Bvlgari's India launch and presents over 75 works and 23 acclaimed artists in an exhibition celebrating the 'Serpenti' icon. Like its Shanghai and Seoul editions celebrating the Chinese Year of the Snake, the India exhibition, drawn from institutional and private collections, also examines the symbiotic relationship between the serpent and history, art and meaning.

The tableau of artworks is diverse – from artist Radha Sollur and her impressive sculptural forms in paper to Turkish-American media artist Refik Anadol's futuristic work, a fascinating 360-degree mirrored environment shaped by machine learning algorithms trained on natural snake forms. Critically acclaimed Madhubani artist Baua Devi, one of the few Indian women who has shown at the Centre Pompidou, presents her serpent forms along with other notable artists such as Subodh Gupta, Reena Saini Kallat, Olivia Fraser and Rithika Merchant.

Serpenti Infinito has been put together by Nature Morte and Artistic Director Sean Anderson, who was formerly Associate Curator at New York's MoMA and co-curator of the first-ever Qatar pavilion at Venice Biennale's Exhibition of Architecture this year. Edited excerpts from a conversation:

Question: *How did the idea for a show about nagas and art come about?*
Answer: My ambition was to not isolate the image of the *naga* or the serpent but think about it holistically – think across time and across various contexts of India, in particular. Knowing that the *naga* has had a transcendental aspect to it throughout time, a spiritual significance, and a locality attached to it, I wanted to create an image of the *naga* that embraces its multiplicity. And, of course, think about it with resonance within artistic practices.

Q: *What did it mean to conceptualise a themed exhibition on Indian art for an international jewellery brand?*
A: Bvlgari had a specific trajectory of how this exhibition could be made based on their earlier show in Shanghai but I felt it was extremely important that we not think of the *naga* as one singular concept and questioned whether we could make an exhibition where the jewellery is not separate from the art. In India, the *naga* could be represented with many meanings, either as an individual or collective memory or as an artistic expression. The exhibition looks at the history of the *naga* in India through stories, narrative, spatially and through textures. I wanted an international jewellery brand to be refracted through Indian art.

Q: *It is interesting that the show juxtaposes international jewellery with Indian art.*
A: I felt it was important to nuance what the serpent in Indian art might be, and also that the art not be a backdrop for the jewellery. The exhibition aims at amplifying the jewellery and vice versa and is an opportunity for reciprocity, to tell us something about ourselves. Representing India was no easy task and there was so much to show. I wanted it to appeal and speak to as many different voices and constituencies as possible.

Q: *What can the visitor expect to see?*
A: The exhibition has ancient art, historical art and works from modernism borrowed from museums, institutions and collectors. There are large, commissioned works like the immersive work by Anadol. The non-Indian artists are shown because there is a very strong thematic relationship with their art. Working with the curatorial perspective of finding artworks that deal with the theme of serpents, I found a lot of resonance with localised artworks and wanted no division between indigenous, modern and contemporary art – terms that are used by art historians to create different forms of value.

Q: *What are the exciting works in there for you?*
A: They are all my favourites because I chose them, but a discovery for me was Baua Devi. She is an exceptional artist, a storyteller who makes exquisite paintings and drawings that are narrative in structure and form and make you realise that we are embedded in worlds sometimes of our own making and sometimes not. My hope for the visitor in this exhibition is to experience the multiple presents of Indian art.

Serpenti Infinito *is on view at the NMACC till October 17.*

The interviewer is the founder-director of Eka Archiving Services.

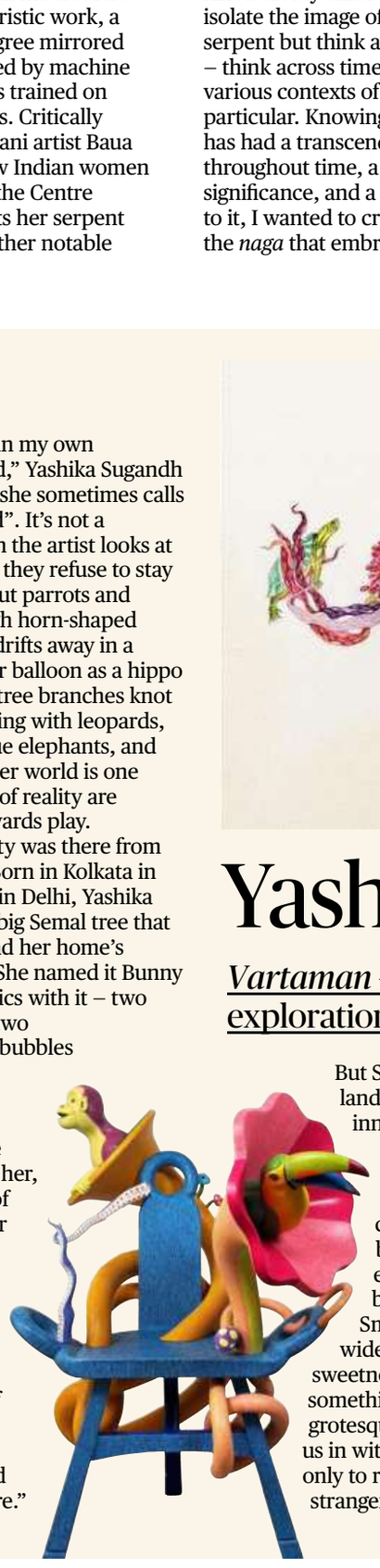
Yashika Sugandh's la la land

Vartaman – with its candy colours and surreal imagery – is a poetic exploration of the balance between humanity and nature

Aastha D.

"I think I live in my own wonderland," Yashika Sugandh says. Or, as she sometimes calls it, her "la la land". It's not a metaphor. When the artist looks at ordinary things, they refuse to stay still. Chairs sprout parrots and monkeys through horn-shaped funnels; a snail drifts away in a makeshift hot-air balloon as a hippo gazes upwards; tree branches knot and twist, crawling with leopards, chameleons, blue elephants, and rubber ducks. Her world is one where the rules of reality are forever bent towards play.

That sensibility was there from the beginning. Born in Kolkata in 1993 and raised in Delhi, Yashika remembers the big Semal tree that stood just beyond her home's boundary wall. She named it Bunny and hosted picnics with it – two plates of chips, two glasses of Coke, bubbles blown into its branches. What might look like fantasy from the outside was, for her, survival: a way of making space for herself when human connection felt precarious. "I always had low self-confidence and felt a lack of acceptance and love," she says. "Instead, I found comfort in nature."



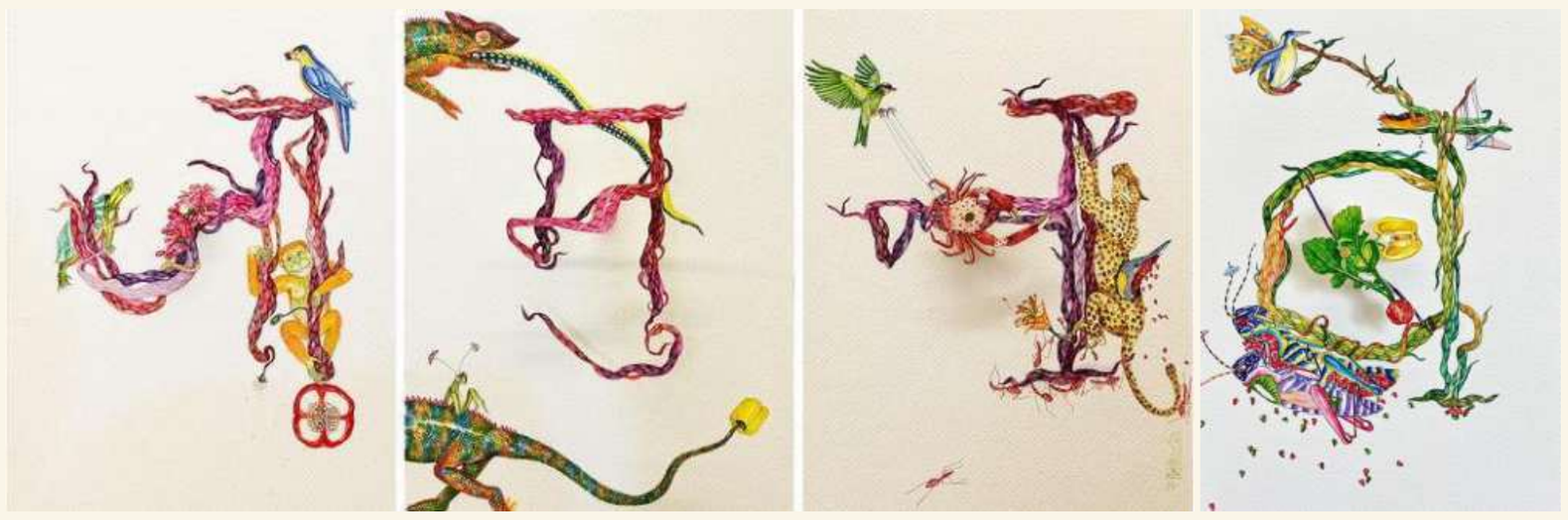
But Sugandh's la la land isn't simply innocent. Look again at the works: the colours are hyper-saturated, candy-box bright, but stare long enough and they begin to sour. Smiles stretch too wide, eyes bulge, sweetness tips into something faintly grotesque. The works lure us in with childlike charm only to reveal something stranger, darker.

Why her wonderland matters

When her exhibition *Vartaman* (Hindi for 'the present') is introduced to the public, the curatorial note describes her "profound reverence for nature" and the "nurturing essence of trees". It is sincere, no doubt, but these lines flatten her work into moral instruction, turning trees into metaphors of virtue and birds into bullet points for duty. The life of the work slips away beneath the weight of "reverence" and "responsibility".

The frailty of such language is that it reflects how uncomfortable we've become with play itself. We demand depth in the form of lessons, and moral payoff in place of imagination. But whimsy can be serious work – it shows us the irrational, the grotesque, and the joyful instincts that make us human. To treat it as childish is to forget that fantasy is one of our oldest ways of thinking.

Her meticulous brushwork borrows from Indian miniature painting – the same patience and density of detail, but turned towards a far stranger cosmos. "Yashika's practice dreams in terms of ecology, yet is significantly rooted in our contemporary times," says curator Sanya Malik. "Her hybrid creatures suggest a cohesion between humanity and nature.



Artworks from *Vartaman*; and (below) Yashika Sugandh. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Shifting the frame

That word, ecology, brings us to what makes her work relevant far beyond aesthetic delight. The Anthropocene – a term coined by scientists to describe our current epoch – is the age in which human activity has reshaped the planet's climate, soil, and biodiversity. Most conversation around it centres on human guilt and responsibility. But that framing, too, keeps humans at the centre.

Vartaman does the opposite. It doesn't sermonise about our place in nature. Sugandh's animals, objects, and hybrids coexist as equals, part of an ecosystem indifferent to human importance. As Malik puts it, the artist's works "help us value life in a meaningful way" precisely because they remove us from the centre of it. In doing so, they offer a quiet corrective to the Anthropocene's ego – the assumption that we are the planet's protagonists. Her world reminds us that we are merely one of its unruly species.

Which is why Sugandh's wonderland matters. It refuses apology. It doesn't try to make strangeness respectable or decoration profound. It simply insists that imagination doesn't need to be tamed to be meaningful.

Vartaman *is on till October 31 at Black Cube Gallery, New Delhi.*

The essayist-educator writes on culture, and is founding editor of Proseterity *– a literary arts magazine.*